

## Research Paper

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# Japan's Abe Administration Steering a Course between Pragmatism and Extremism



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## Summary

- Sympathetic analysts of Japanese politics highlight Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's moderate and internationalist posture, emphasizing economic recovery and a pragmatic approach to security issues. By contrast, his critics focus on the fear that Abe's instinctive stance is one of uncompromising conservative nationalism, including historical revisionism.
- In his first few months in office, Abe adopted a cautious approach, concentrating on delivering his campaign's economic promises. However, in late 2013 his visit to the Yasukuni shrine and a cabinet reshuffle hinted at a move towards a more controversial agenda.
- The 'Abe doctrine', set out in a speech by the prime minister on 18 January 2013, explicitly refers to democratic norms and values, placing Japan in the community of law-abiding democracies and pointing to its similarities with the West, including a commitment to international cooperation and the rule of law. This doctrine is part of an effort to mark China as the odd man out in the international community.
- By promoting Japan's new security legislation to allow a broader interpretation of the country's right to 'collective self-defence', Abe's government is attempting to convince the public that these reforms are essential to protect Japan. But critics are suspicious that they are a back-door route to more wide-ranging constitutional change and a *de facto* revision of Japan's alliance relationship with the United States.
- Opinion polls are showing a sharp dip in the popularity of the government, which may find it politic to maintain its initial pragmatic foreign policy posture, avoiding any statements that could potentially be interpreted as an endorsement of Japan's past wartime actions. Sustaining broad popular agreement appears to be essential for promoting the security revisions that are arguably vital to Japan's long-term strategic and national interests.

## Introduction

Nearly three years have passed since Shinzo Abe was re-elected as Japan's prime minister in December 2012. In contrast to his first term in office, which ended abruptly after a year in 2007, Abe's second term has lasted longer than that of any other prime minister since Jun'ichiro Koizumi (2001–06). This is a major achievement considering that his predecessors had averaged at best a year in office. With economic recovery and political stability, Abe certainly seems to have put Japan back on the geopolitical map and to have presented a revitalized image of strong and authoritative prime ministerial leadership.

Perceptions of his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) administration have remained divided, however, both at home and abroad. Two sharply polarized views exist among current watchers of the Japanese political scene. Sympathetic observers might be inclined to stress the importance of setting aside historical issues for the moment, in favour of focusing on positive economic developments. This view highlights the sudden revival of the Japanese economy after two decades of stagnation, as reflected in the rise of the Nikkei from 8,434.61 to 19,000 over the course of five months (November 2012–March 2013),<sup>1</sup> along with a stable political environment underpinned by the continuity of the Abe cabinet. In contrast to the confusion that characterized a series of Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) governments from 2009 to 2012 (under a succession of prime ministers – Yukio Hatoyama, Naoto Kan and Yoshihiko Noda), where politics was chaotic and the economy still struggling, the Abe government has taken a strong lead in tackling a range of contentious issues while displaying a deft and pragmatic touch in the implementation of new policies, especially in the security sphere. For its supporters, this is an administration that, after some twenty years, has brought back economic growth and political stability to Japan, that has remained resolute in the face of an emerging geopolitical challenge from China and that will, in the future, restore the pride and glory that the Japanese nation deserves.

More critical observers might seek to set aside the question of 'Abenomics' and the economy, concentrating instead on how the government has promoted historical revisionism, as evidenced in the prime minister's visit to the controversial Yasukuni shrine<sup>2</sup> in December 2013, along with pronouncements that appear to have whitewashed or rationalized Japanese military adventures before and during the Second World War. Such critics would probably take issue with the lack of attention to press freedom, and alleged indirect efforts to exert vague but persistent pressure against political opinions in newspapers or on television that are critical of the government. Recent efforts to promote new legislation enacting more ambitious security provisions in the Diet (the Japanese parliament) have generated fresh controversy. Critics see this as a threat to the country's long-standing constitutional provisions, and Abe's policies as a direct attempt to overturn the norms and values of the liberal political postwar order – measures that risk eventually embroiling Japan in a future regional war.

Attitudes towards the current government, particularly in the context of its foreign and security policies and the issue of constitutional revision, tend to be concentrated around these two extremes,

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<sup>1</sup> Atsushi Kodera, 'Inflation eludes, stock rise helps few, but yen's fall hurts many', *Japan Times*, 3 April 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/04/03/business/economy-business/inflation-eludes-stock-rise-helps-yens-fall-hurts-many/#.VdWVbX1UU3A>.

<sup>2</sup> Abe's decision to visit Yasukuni was highly controversial outside Japan, not only in China and South Korea where the legacy of Japan's colonial rule during the 1930s remains acutely sensitive, but also in the United States. Senior US government officials, including Vice-President Joe Biden, had called in advance for moderation on difficult historical issues, and following the visit, the US embassy in Tokyo took the unprecedented step of releasing a public statement noting that the US government was 'disappointed' by Abe's actions. See 'Abe grossly misjudged US reaction before making Yasukuni visit', *Asahi Shimbun*, 28 December 2013.

with little common ground. To explain the evolution of these two contrasting and seemingly contradictory perceptions, this paper explores the historical background and various aspects of the Abe administration's outlook.

### A moderate conservative?

The second Abe cabinet was formed after three years of DPJ government (the first non-LDP government since 1996), which were erratic and uncoordinated, frequently bedevilled by divisive, internal factionalism, and associated with a catalogue of errors and uncashed promises. Prime Minister Hatoyama's mishandling of the relocation of the Futenma US military base in Okinawa, as well as Kan's seeming inability to coordinate adequate crisis management in the face of Japan's triple disaster of a major earthquake, devastating tsunami and meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear plant, exhausted whatever political capital might have accompanied the DPJ victory in 2009. Voter disaffection and no-confidence votes in the Diet led to a landslide victory by the LDP at the general election of December 2012.

The LDP leadership was well aware that the election was more a vote against the DPJ than a positive endorsement of its own party. Abe was clearly determined to make his second term more successful and stable than his first. He appointed the leaders of the key powerful factions within the LDP as a means of creating a strong and unified government. This was a well-balanced cabinet, with an emphasis on inclusivity and experience, and without any clear ideological messages. Although vocal conservatives such as Tomomi Inada (Regulatory Reform) or Hakubun Shimomura (Education) were represented, as well as Taro Aso (Finance), so too were moderates such as Fumio Kishida (Foreign Affairs) and Sadakazu Tanigaki (Justice). The only leading personality not included in the cabinet was Shigeru Ishiba, Abe's long-standing political rival, a former minister of defence and a leading security specialist with a reputation for supporting a revisionist political agenda. However, Ishiba was appointed to the key position as LDP secretary-general, with key responsibility for running the party's election campaigns. Overall, the 2012 cabinet was an all-star game for the party, intended to avoid any repeat of the miserable defeat in 2009 and designed to cement and to hold on to political power for as long as possible.

This representation of many factions in the cabinet is essential to an understanding of the current government. Historically, the LDP has been more of a loose coalition of conservative parties than a coherent political body with a command centre. In contrast, for example, to the ideologically distinctive Labour and Conservative parties at the heart of post-1945 UK politics, the LDP has, since its formation in 1955, been a broad and inclusive political church, united less by ideology than by the single-minded goal of winning elections. Other than during the period between 1945 and 1960, when Japanese politics was dominated by contentious issues associated with constitutional revision and alignment with the United States within the Cold War, political success in Japan has been a function of policy pragmatism and the ability to deliver economic prosperity.

Party politicians in Japan, whether in the LDP or in the leading opposition parties, such as the Japan Socialist Party or DPJ, have often positioned themselves along two separate and distinct political axes: an economic policy spectrum stretching from a small-state, neoliberal approach to a more interventionist model of paternalistic government interventionism; and a foreign policy spectrum ranging from security cooperation centred on the US–Japan alliance to a more explicitly internationalist approach focused on the United Nations. Mapping an individual politician's policy

preferences against these two spectrums can provide a guide to his or her ideological preferences that is often independent of the policy priorities of the party to which he or she belongs.

It was the mainstream conservatives, or Hoshu Honryu, who dominated LDP politics from the 1960s to 1980s; their main concern was economic growth, and they were content to leave the national security agenda in the hands of the United States. The factions that composed Hoshu Honryu were, however, severely damaged in 1993 when a number of young political leaders (most prominently Ichiro Ozawa and Tsutomu Hata) defected from the largest Takeshita<sup>3</sup> faction (Keiseikai) and formed a new party (the Japan Renewal Party, or Shinseito), leading to the LDP losing its majority in the election that year. With the Takeshita faction in disarray, the Seiwa Policy Research Council (Seiwa Seisaku Kenyukai, or Seiwakai), a faction that had occupied a permanent number two, if not number three, position, suddenly emerged as the front runner. It was the Seiwakai that, after gaining power, provided future candidates for prime minister, including Yoshiro Mori, Koizumi and Abe.

If the Seiwakai were to overplay its cards, however, rival factions would form an alliance and challenge the political leadership, and it would take an audacious and tactically agile leader (such as Koizumi) to overcome such opposition.<sup>4</sup> Maintaining factional balance has been a hallmark of a successful and stable LDP throughout much of its postwar history. Indeed, it was in part the failure of Abe's grandfather, former prime minister Nobusuke Kishi, to include a broad spectrum of conservative politicians within his own cabinet in the late 1950s that ultimately led to an internal party rebellion, forcing him to step down as premier in 1960. It would be surprising if Abe had not taken this bitter lesson to heart. Moreover, in 2012 all factions were in a cooperative mood, committed to launch a strong administration that would offset challenges from the opposition parties and aware that any internal divisions would be exploited by their adversaries. As noted above, the first Abe cabinet was more an LDP than an Abe cabinet; the government focused on economic recovery rather than national security or constitutional revision, even though Abe himself had long been viewed as one of the party's more conservative members. In contrast to 2006–07, when he had devoted much of his energy to controversial issues, including constitutional reform, Abe played it safe and in his first few months in office sought to concentrate on delivering on his campaign's economic promises.<sup>5</sup>

A moderate cabinet led by Shinzo Abe must have surprised observers both within and outside Japan. Belying the two-dimensional image of a historical revisionist, Abe eschewed inflammatory statements and seldom referred to the history issue. Indeed, judged at face value, his general approach was conciliatory and consistent with earlier statements by his predecessors. Specifically, he agreed to endorse two key public statements by previous Japanese prime ministers recognizing Japan's wartime responsibilities. One was the Kono statement of 1993, issued by then chief cabinet secretary

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<sup>3</sup> Noboru Takeshita served as prime minister of Japan from 1987 to 1990, and for much of his career as a senior politician was head of the largest faction in the LDP. Takeshita took on his role as faction chief from an earlier prime minister, Kakuei Tanaka, a classic 'machine politician' who used a generous system of financial incentives and pork-barrel politics to dominate the leadership of the LDP and to control an electoral process that underpinned much of the political ascendancy of the LDP in the postwar period.

<sup>4</sup> Koizumi's chosen strategy for maintaining his political support was to define himself explicitly as an 'anti-LDP' LDP politician, frequently appealing directly to the Japanese public over the heads of his party rivals in an effort to bolster his legitimacy and secure critically important negotiating room. Coming from a numerically small political faction, Koizumi had been elected as LDP president in 2001 with the support of younger and local prefectural party members, at a time of existential crisis within the LDP, in response to the policy failures of a hugely unpopular Mori government. Astute and skilful in using the bully pulpit of high-profile television appearances, Koizumi cleverly adopted a public gambit of threatening to destroy the LDP if his policies of economic reform, deregulation and postal privatization were not adopted by the party.

<sup>5</sup> The 2012 election campaign had been dominated by economic issues, with an electorate seemingly little interested in questions of foreign policy or security that have over time become more central to political debate both in Japan and internationally. As a prospective LDP presidential candidate in 2006, Abe had set out his more ambitious ideas for restoring pride in Japan and the need to engage with difficult historical issues from a revisionist perspective in a personal manifesto entitled *Utsukushii Nihon e (Towards a Beautiful Japan)*. But Abe had learnt from his first term in office that front-loading controversial constitutional issues or topics related to national identity had cost him critically important public support.



Yohei Kono, acknowledging that the Japanese military had been involved in the management of so-called 'comfort stations' – wartime brothels established to cater for Japanese troops, and facilitating the forcible recruitment of Korean and other Asian women into prostitution for the Japanese military. The other was the 1995 statement issued by then prime minister Tomiichi Murayama in which he expressed his 'deep remorse' and 'heartfelt apology' for Japan's actions during the 1930s. Both the Kono and Murayama statements have been opposed by the extreme right in Japan, and Abe's position on these suggested two possible goals: either a desire to plant himself securely on the middle ground of mainstream political consensus within Japan; or a deliberate strategy of prioritization – addressing key economic issues of concern to the electorate, while hoping to secure more seats for LDP candidates in the upper house elections of 2013 and thus, in turn, to buy political space to focus on more contentious security and constitutional issues later in his political term.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside the issue of identity politics, Abe also adopted a moderate position towards Japan's immediate neighbours, or at the very least sought to avoid exacerbating already fraught relations with other countries in Northeast Asia. Chinese military actions in the neighbouring seas around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands (the source of a long-running territorial dispute between China and Japan) had become increasingly menacing after 2012. But instead of relying on a naked nationalistic outburst against China, Abe chose to represent his country as democratic and law-abiding, just like its Western allies, making it easier for the US and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members to align themselves with Japan. This image of moderation was extremely successful: in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, and in effect everywhere Abe visited and made impressive speeches, his government was hailed as one with which it was possible to share values and do business, and not as a monster of historical revisionism eager to assert its political will and project its power towards its neighbours.<sup>7</sup>

In the cabinet reshuffle in December 2014, moderate leaders such as Tanigaki were replaced, leaving the impression that the LDP cabinet was becoming less eclectic and increasingly dominated by politicians supportive of a more hardline agenda.

There were, however, cracks in the façade. After about a year of moderate political leadership, Abe visited the Yasukuni shrine in late 2013 (in direct contravention of advice from senior US government officials), reviving fears that he might be sympathetic to historical revisionism. In the cabinet reshuffle in December 2014, moderate leaders such as Tanigaki were replaced, leaving the impression that the LDP cabinet was becoming less eclectic and increasingly dominated by politicians supportive of a more hardline agenda. New, more assertive defence legislation, and especially provisions intended to tighten up the rules governing state secrecy, reinforced worries that Abe might be tilting the country in an illiberal direction and inclined to ride roughshod over the constitution in favour of new interpretations intended to expand Japan's military operations overseas. The issue here is whether

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<sup>6</sup> Abe had given some support for constitutional revision during the upper house election campaign of 2013 – a move that may have been motivated by a desire to avoid losing ground to a new rival conservative political grouping, Nippon Ishin no Kai (the Japan Restoration Party), that took an unambiguous position in favour of constitutional revision.

<sup>7</sup> The circumstances surrounding the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are complex, reflected in the lack of a consensus between the Chinese and Japanese governments over the historical details underpinning their respective territorial claims, and compounded by a series of recent bilateral clashes. For example, while Chinese incursions into Japan's maritime waters have become increasingly bold and provocative in recent years, the decision by the DPJ government of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda in September 2012 to nationalize the islands (in an effort to block their attempted purchase by the then governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara) prompted a sharp deterioration in relations between Beijing and Tokyo. This was a risk which senior US officials had pointed out when privately advising Noda not to push ahead with nationalization.

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Abe can successfully maintain his moderate and internationalist posture, focusing on economic recovery and a pragmatic approach to security issues, or whether, as his critics have feared, he will openly assert a form of uncompromising conservative nationalism. In this context, the critical question revolves around motivation. Does Abe see himself as a consensus politician, able to unite the country around widely shared values in the face of new security challenges? Or does his desire to lead forcefully place him on a collision course with mainstream public opinion, which remains sceptical about new legislative initiatives, both in the security sphere and above all on constitutional issues where the prime minister's basic position may be non-negotiable?

### Norms and doctrines

One of the most striking elements of Abe's approach to foreign affairs since 2012 has been his commitment to a punishing schedule of overseas trips. This most peripatetic of premiers visited no fewer than 49 countries in under two years. One would naturally expect a Japanese prime minister to visit the United States, given the historical importance of the bilateral alliance relationship between Tokyo and Washington, but in the case of Abe, he has been to all the member nations of ASEAN, some more than once, and has also found time to travel to Africa, the Middle East and Europe. This is in remarkable contrast to his immediate predecessors, who rarely stepped outside Japan during their (admittedly brief) tenures.

Moreover, Abe has shown himself to be an effective practitioner of public diplomacy, focused on engagement and relatively at ease in connecting with foreign audiences. His speeches (often in English) have been positively received by politicians and the public abroad. Typically in the past a speech made by a Japanese prime minister would be greeted with polite indifference, especially if delivered in English that was sometimes hard to comprehend. While his command of English is a little hesitant and his presentation can be a little laboured, Abe has made great efforts to focus on reaching out to his audiences through clearly articulated English-language addresses. He has not been content simply to deliver texts provided by foreign ministry or cabinet officials, but has frequently sought to incorporate a personal and often emotionally affecting set of references. In a speech to the Australian parliament in July 2014 and in an unprecedented address to a joint session of the US Congress in June 2015, this reputedly conservative and hawkish leader opened his remarks by highlighting wartime memories and imagery, presented not from the Japanese perspective but from that of Australia and the United States. Indeed, it is probably no exaggeration to say that Abe has been one of Japan's most effective communicators abroad. This has probably much to do with the content of his speeches, but Abe's willingness to work hard at presentation (as well as the skill of his speechwriters) has doubtless been an important factor in winning him plaudits from foreign audiences. One has to go back many years, perhaps to the 1980s and the era of Yasuhiro Nakasone, to find a leader with a similar commitment to engagement with overseas audiences. Whether attention to detail in this fashion is sufficient to dispel doubts in some quarters about aspects of Japan's approach to both regional and historical issues is unclear.

Abe's arguments in his foreign speeches have been simple, consistent and shaped around a clear thesis. The prototype can be seen in the text he prepared for an ASEAN meeting in Jakarta on 18 January 2013.<sup>8</sup> Although the prime minister was unable to deliver the speech, owing to the

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<sup>8</sup> 'The Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy', Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/statement/201301/18speech\\_e.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201301/18speech_e.html).

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disruptive influence of a terrorist attack in Algeria that month, involving the capture of a number of Japanese hostages, the core message of the text clearly sets out his philosophy – so starkly, in fact, that it merits being characterized as the kernel of an ‘Abe doctrine’. The speech represents Japan as a land of democracy and the rule of law, where freedom of ideas, expression and speech are honoured and valued as in the Western democracies. Indeed, the country’s democratic credentials and normative clout as a member of the liberal community are underscored by emphasizing its status as the world’s ‘largest maritime democracy’ (*sekai saidaino kaiyo minshushugi*): as a law-abiding nation, Japan belongs to the free world, and is an ally of the United States, which is the world’s largest naval and economic power; as a member of the free world, Japan expects other nations to defend freedom of speech, observe the rules of maritime law, foster free and open economic relations, and encourage communication between different cultures.

Compared with past Japanese prime ministerial statements, this new formulation of national goals and aspirations is striking, most notably because of its explicit reference to democratic norms and values. The earliest expression of Japan’s post-1945 foreign policy thinking (and a reflection of mainstream Japanese conservative thinking), commonly characterized as the Yoshida doctrine after former prime minister Shigeru Yoshida, focused on economic recovery as a top priority, while relying on a permanent US military presence in Japan to achieve a credible national defence without excessive financial burdens. Yoshida, in effect, cleverly ceded security and defence responsibilities to Washington, to provide space and time for Japan to focus on economic recovery and growth. In its grandest and most ambitious formulation (one favoured less by Yoshida and more by later politicians and academic observers), Yoshida’s approach evolved over time into a fundamental effort to redefine the very essence of the nation-state. To some, this took the form of a post-modern identity in which central government happily abandoned its monopoly over the use of force in favour of an approach rooted in UN-centred internationalism, low-profile diplomacy and a broader commitment to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. Whether in Yoshida’s original narrow expression of the national interest in the 1940s and early 1950s, or in later pragmatic efforts by Japanese leaders to find a place for Japan in both the Cold War and post-Cold War worlds, it has been rare to find references to an international community of democracy and human rights.

This tendency to shy away from potentially contentious or divisive references to political values was also evident in another important attempt to articulate a foreign policy vision for Japan. In this instance, the doctrinal formulation was associated with Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda in a seminal speech he made in Manila in 1977 while on a visit to a number of ASEAN states. This so-called Fukuda doctrine was replete with rhetorical references to peace and prosperity, including a ‘peace diplomacy oriented toward all directions in the world’, as well as references to Japan’s ‘contribution to the peace and prosperity of Southeast Asia on an equal basis’. Strikingly absent from the text were any references to democracy or human rights. The omission is understandable, first, because many governments in Southeast Asia were authoritarian at the time; and, secondly, because the aim of the Fukuda doctrine was to prioritize economic diplomacy (bolstered by Japan’s overseas development aid to developing nations) as the second tier of Japan’s foreign policy next to national security. In effect, economic aid was to be deployed as a strategic asset, fostering both the stability and the prosperity of vulnerable Southeast Asian economies, while also complementing and promoting Japan’s own economic growth objectives. References to democracy or human rights were considered unwise and inappropriate when providing assistance to authoritarian regimes.



The Abe doctrine is therefore a major change in Japan's foreign policy priorities: by placing Japan in the community of law-abiding democracies, it seeks to highlight the similarities between Japan and Western democracies and the political commonalities underpinning international cooperation and the rule of law. It is easy to see why Abe's speeches were so warmly greeted in the US, Britain and Australia. This approach also has an equally important strategic rationale. Focusing on political values is an easy and obvious way of highlighting the contrast between Japan and its regional and global partners on the one hand, and an authoritarian China on the other. Presenting the leadership in Beijing as dismissive of human rights and democratic norms in China, as well as potentially aggressive in its development of its military capabilities abroad (whether, in a maritime context, in the South or East China Seas or, in the air, through the promotion of an expansive and unilaterally announced Air Defense Identification Zone [ADIZ]) highlights and magnifies the differences between China and the rest of the world. China, according to this interpretation, is therefore the odd man out in the international community, not Japan.

Calling for international solidarity between the world's democracies is, however, not the only way to confront China. One can easily imagine a more conventional and traditional *realpolitik* response to that country's rise that focuses on military strategies and the development of a regional arms race and a diplomatic campaign to build up new security partnerships intended to offset, if not contain, its ambitions. While Japan's defence community has embraced elements of the latter approach (as reflected in a small but steady increase in Japanese defence expenditure over the past three years,<sup>9</sup> as well as new legislative initiatives to boost the country's defence capabilities and flexibility), Abe's astute stress on values has had the advantage of positioning Japan firmly in the camp of liberal internationalist legitimacy. As a corollary it has, in part, helped to insulate Japan from criticism that it may be seeking to turn the clock back to the prewar era through the promotion of historical revisionism and militaristic policies.

Notwithstanding these benefits, there are limits to the efficacy of this approach, not least because the global and regional environment is undergoing considerable change. Extolling the virtues of the international liberal regime, with its stress on order and the rule of law, makes sense so long as there is a general consensus that this order still prevails. But this assumption is challenged by a host of recent developments, including the crisis in Ukraine, the fragmentation of Syria and the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), China's increasing economic and political influence, the establishment of new institutional structures that depart from the post-1945 Bretton Woods consensus – most notably the establishment of the Asian Investment Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) – and fears of a possible US retreat into isolationism. Japan under Abe may be at risk of being behind the geopolitical curve, trying too hard to situate itself in a world that no longer exists, and in the process demonstrating a weakness common to many flawed strategic outlooks, namely planning for future eventualities on the basis of past, outdated certainties.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> ¥4.75 trillion in FY2013, ¥4.88 trillion in FY2014 and ¥4.98 trillion in FY2015. See *Defense Budget*, Japan's Ministry of Defense, [http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d\\_budget/](http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_budget/).

<sup>10</sup> Henry Kissinger has recently written persuasively about the breakdown of established notions of order, both globally and in East Asia, and the need to think creatively and imaginatively about alternative structures. See Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).

## Facing China

What is Abe's policy towards China? Beijing's assertive maritime policy in the South China Sea, arousing anxiety in Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan, predates his election in 2012; Tokyo's attempt to strengthen the US–Japan alliance also dates back to the Kan government.<sup>11</sup> Defence cooperation with Australia, part of a Japanese strategy of developing (alongside its traditional alliance with the United States) new 'minilateral' security partnerships with a number of regional actors, was also in place long before Abe took office. What, then, is new about his approach?

The first distinctive feature has been the focus on ASEAN members. They stand out in terms of the frequency of Abe's overseas visits, in clear contrast to the DPJ's virtual neglect of ASEAN as a policy priority. The reason for this is obvious. While the US and Australia can provide the muscle in terms of military hardware and alliance support to deter China, ASEAN provides critical political support and legitimacy to Japan's efforts to balance against China's rise. Over the past decade, the steady trend has been for ASEAN to accommodate Beijing; if that pattern can be reversed, or at the very least slowed down, and if not only Vietnam and the Philippines but all ASEAN members begin to express common security concerns over China's maritime actions, this would be a diplomatic achievement that would strengthen Tokyo's strategic interests and its diplomatic clout in the region.

For now it is unclear how far Abe has succeeded in shifting the political balance in Japan's favour. Although Vietnam and the Philippines have enthusiastically welcomed Tokyo's approach to Southeast Asia (a trend reflected in important new bilateral accords enabling Japan to provide much-needed defence equipment to both Hanoi and Manila), Cambodia still appears to favour building stronger relations with Beijing. Both Indonesia and Thailand, key members of ASEAN, are entangled in domestic political issues that limit their opportunities to take new foreign policy initiatives. Moreover, since China is the largest trade partner for all of ASEAN, there is a natural reluctance among member states to confront China directly.<sup>12</sup> ASEAN, after all, has always sought an independent breathing space between China and Japan. Its members certainly do not want to be pushed around by China, but nor do they wish to oppose the country's will. China, moreover, is a divisive issue for ASEAN, as the priorities of the member states are different, and ASEAN as an organization has sought to avoid issues that will highlight and intensify internal divisions.

One might argue that Abe's tough policy towards Beijing has actually worked in Japan's favour. After all, China's leader Xi Jinping agreed to meet Abe at the November 2014 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing; furthermore, both the Japanese and Chinese sides agreed four bullet points of agreement shortly before the summit, including a joint commitment on maritime safety, while contentious references to the history issue were discreetly elided in the final communiqué. This is quite different from an earlier Chinese request that Abe commit to avoiding any future visit to Yasukuni as a prerequisite for the summit. In sum, it appeared that Japan had

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as a number of commentators have noted, Japan's shift to a more active security stance has evolved steadily and incrementally since the ending of the Cold War. This reflects a broad consensus across the political spectrum (recognized by both LDP and DPJ politicians) on the importance of enhancing Japan's defence preparedness in the face of a number of critical security challenges. These include not only a rising China, but also the possibility of a nuclearized North Korea and a range of non-traditional security threats, including global terrorism, piracy and challenges from separatist and populist movements to the integrity of nation-states in the region. The focus has shifted away from the Cold War threat of a Soviet-led assault on the north of Japan towards a consideration of the security challenges to Japan's southeast, including in particular the risk of conflict with a more regionally assertive China. For more on this theme, see Michael Green, *Japan's Reluctant Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), and his later works.

<sup>12</sup> China's new 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, a major commitment to much expanded infrastructure and development spending in Central and Southeast Asia, may (particularly via its Maritime Silk Road dimension) allow Beijing to use economic leverage to mute regional objections to its more assertive military posture in the South China Sea.

successfully persuaded Beijing to normalize relations and re-establish dialogue without any binding commitments from the Abe administration.

There is, however, another interpretation. Since assuming power, Xi Jinping has been continuously engaged in strengthening the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the government and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) through a series of public campaigns against corrupt officials and generals. It has been suggested that some of Beijing's actions, such as the announcement of the expansive ADIZ or the building of platforms in Vietnamese territorial waters, may have been conducted without the knowledge of the Central Committee of the CCP. If that is the case, this change in China's policy priorities may not be a consequence of Japanese (or, for that matter, American) initiatives, but merely a reflection of domestic politics, and evidence that the party is progressively enhancing its decision-making authority and taking power away from the generals.

Arguably, it is this interpretation that explains why China dismantled its oil-rigging platform in the waters around Vietnam in 2014 – a very rare occurrence of the Chinese risking a loss of face by retreating in a struggle of wills over territory. This also explains why the PLA, while periodically limiting its provocative actions near the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, has nevertheless continued to construct runways on islands in the South China Sea where its control is much more secure. Here China is literally 'digging in' – building, in the words of one US critic, a new 'Great Wall of Sand'.<sup>13</sup> While restraining extreme provocations by the military, this time with approval from the Central Committee, Beijing is exerting control over these islands to demonstrate that Japan no longer has *de facto* control of them. Seen in this light, and given China's increasing military expansion, a cautious improvement in diplomatic relations between Beijing and Tokyo is not necessarily a diplomatic victory for Japan.

**Seen in the round, China's muscular regional policy is undiminished, and any current or future minor improvements with Japan may represent a tactical feint rather than a substantive shift in the relationship.**

It remains uncertain whether China is moderating its regional policy in the face of Japan's hard line. At best, one should be cautious in assuming that bilateral Sino-Japanese ties are back on track or that Abe has necessarily been successful in promoting greater stability in the relationship. Seen in the round, China's muscular regional policy is undiminished, and any current or future minor improvements with Japan may represent a tactical feint rather than a substantive shift in the relationship. It is unclear how well prepared Tokyo is, or what policy tools it may have to manage a potential crisis with China, or indeed what actions the US is likely to take in such circumstances. A key potential moderating influence in this context is the bilateral economic relationship between China and Japan. Recent fluctuations in the Chinese stock market and the slowdown in China's economic growth may, in the view of some Japanese officials, have encouraged Xi Jinping and those close to him to moderate their criticism of Japan in an effort to avoid jeopardizing the important trade and investment benefits associated with Japanese corporate engagement with China. Liberal international relations specialists like to stress the stabilizing benefits of mutual economic dependency and its ability to reduce the likelihood of bilateral conflict, but it is probably premature to assume that this dynamic is a guarantee against a further deterioration in relations.

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<sup>13</sup> US Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Harry Harris quoted in BBC News, 'China building "great wall of sand" in South China Sea', 1 April 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-32126840>.

## Collective security and domestic politics

The Abe government has presented a number of bills to the parliament that allow a much wider remit in time of crisis for the Self-Defense Forces (SDF). The agenda is not only about military engagement when the security of Japanese territory alone is endangered, but also envisages security scenarios in which both Japan's security and that of its allies and security partners are challenged. As Japan has maintained bilateral security agreements with the United States, one might imagine that this form of 'collective security' had already been settled, but that is not the case. Historically, Japan was eager to rely on US forces for its national security, but was extremely reluctant to aid the United States in situations where direct challenges to Japan's security were absent. The US–Japan mutual security treaty of the 1960s (re-ratified and extended in 1970), which defines the fundamentals of the bilateral security alliance, provides for a US guarantee to maintain Japan's security but does not impose a reciprocal obligation on Japan to provide material assistance to the United States in cases where the security of the US alone is threatened. Indeed, the very notion of 'collective security' has remained contentious and of questionable constitutional validity, and the new security legislation (and related interpretations) has intentionally been narrowly defined to encompass 'collective self-defence' (*shudanteki kieiken*). Japan's SDF will in future have more flexibility to be deployed, whether independently or jointly with other nations, but only for purposes that are clearly related to the national security or defence of Japan broadly defined.<sup>14</sup> This broader interpretation, however, now extends the defence of Japan beyond a purely territorial definition to encompass the security of Japanese nationals as well as access to critical raw materials and energy resources.

The traditional explanation for the lopsided US–Japan alliance, and the absence of any reciprocal obligation on the part of Japan to come to the aid of the US, was the role of pacifism and left-wing public opinion in postwar Japan: specifically, the majority of Japanese were firmly opposed to becoming entangled in a war started by the US. Fear of being sucked into a Cold War conflict, and the legacy of the 1930s in creating a culture of anti-militarism, have allowed the opposition parties in Japan to limit joint military actions with the United States, often relying on Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, which prohibits Japan from possessing arms or military capabilities other than for purely defensive purposes. At the same time, public opinion polls demonstrate that some 80 per cent of respondents support the security treaty with the United States, so the US–Japan alliance *per se* is not contentious, provided its use is limited exclusively to safeguarding the security of Japan. As Paul Midford has argued,<sup>15</sup> pacifist public opinion in Japan was actually a form of defensive realism that restricted Japan's military commitments to a very circumscribed and defensive posture, rather than a categorical commitment to full-throated pacifism.

This defensive realism was essentially a political compromise between mainstream conservatives, with their desire to prioritize economic development over ambitious military expenditure, and the leftist opposition parties, which sought public support by positioning themselves as advocates for peace. Over time, however, the more hawkish, conservative LDP politicians have challenged this development-first priority. This constituency has long been present within the party, represented by figures such as former prime ministers Kishi in the 1950s or Nakasone in the 1980s. More

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<sup>14</sup> See John Swenson-Wright, in *The Role of the Nation-State in Addressing Global Challenges: Japan-UK Perspectives* (London: Chatham House, 2015), available at <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/role-nation-state-addressing-global-challenges-japan-uk-perspectives>; and John Swenson-Wright, 'What Japan's military shift means', BBC News, 2 July 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-28122791>.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security: From Pacifism to Realism?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 124–91.

recently, however, they have acquired a more prominent position within the government – most notably in the form of Abe himself – and in the wider political establishment. To members of this group, the neglect of the military, a position supported by both mainstream conservatives and the left, had weakened Japan, in terms of military muscle and moral integrity. Reclaiming and re-legitimizing the role of the Japanese military, but firmly within the context of the US–Japan alliance, has become a paramount objective for the new conservatives in the LDP.

There are two ways to achieve this objective. One is to amend the constitution, drop Article 9 and push for a straightforward recognition of collective security or, for that matter, the military itself. This was in fact the original position adopted by the new conservatives, who viewed Japan's 1947 constitution, drafted and adopted under the allied occupation, as too liberal. Constitutional amendment, however, requires a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament (along with majority support in a popular referendum), and Komeito, the coalition partner for the LDP, has been adamant in its opposition to such change. It was therefore quite natural for the Abe government to choose a second means of realizing its goal: to introduce new defence legislation and argue that it is constitutional.

Recently, this plan has experienced an unexpected setback. When three constitutional lawyers (including one recommended by the LDP) were invited to parliament in June 2015 to express their opinions, they unanimously agreed that the government's proposed defence legislation was unconstitutional. This unexpected development has created the first major political challenge for Abe in pursuing his new security goals. Critics see the defence laws as a perfect symbol of the dangerous character of a government that, in their judgment, risks dragging Japan down another path to war.

The recent debate over the defence legislation has been dominated by discussions over its constitutionality. From the viewpoint of international relations this seems anomalous, given that Japan's long-standing security relationship with the United States has, *de facto*, involved collective security cooperation, albeit within very strictly defined limits. The simple reality is that, in the event of a security crisis in East Asia (for example, a serious incident involving Taiwan), it is inconceivable that the US would not request military support from Japan, even if such support might be deemed unconstitutional.<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding this closer alignment with the US, the Abe government's claim that these laws will strengthen deterrence capabilities *vis-à-vis* China is questionable, since Beijing must have long assumed that Japan will join hands with the US in time of war, irrespective of the constitutional limitations. Even setting aside the legality of the new legislation, its actual effect on the behaviour of potential adversaries is uncertain. Its merit lies less in enhancing deterrence than in providing the Japanese government with greater flexibility to respond swiftly to a future security crisis, and in closer cooperation with the United States. What is uncertain is whether this new flexibility will heighten the risk of creeping, unintentional and unanticipated involvement by Japan in future conflicts outside its traditional remit of self-protection.

It is doubtful if the Abe administration would be willing to lead the country into another regional conflict, and Abe himself has been careful to state repeatedly that the new legislation will not allow Japan to declare war. The government's approach is a minimalist and restricted one. Strengthening alliance commitments is, after all, a natural response to Chinese military advances in maritime

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<sup>16</sup> The recently agreed new US–Japan Joint Defense Guidelines provide scope for a much more active cooperative relationship between the militaries of the two countries, involving joint operations and coordination in a variety of security scenarios.



Asia. Nevertheless, there is no question that it has challenged Japan's long tradition of low-profile defence policy. Pacifism has been the foundation of the country's postwar *de facto* isolationism, limiting overseas military involvement and, at least in the minds of the Japanese public, keeping it safe from involvement in conflict. The government, by testing the envelope of Japan's security risk aversion, by moving beyond the cautious position of its early days, and through the prime minister's own more assertive position, has entered new and uncharted political waters at home and abroad that may undermine its stability.

The government, by testing the envelope of Japan's security risk aversion, by moving beyond the cautious position of its early days, and through the prime minister's own more assertive position, has entered new and uncharted political waters at home and abroad that may undermine its stability.

The prime minister's popularity has dipped strikingly (support for the Abe cabinet was just 37 per cent in July 2015, according to an Asahi poll<sup>17</sup>) in the face of debates within the Diet over the government's new security legislation, and it remains unclear whether the government has succeeded in convincing public opinion that the new measures are essential to protect Japan. Indeed, given that the new interpretation of collective self-defence has materially increased the likelihood that Japan's SDF will at some point be involved in a wider set of as yet unspecified conflicts, a risk-averse Japanese public may become increasingly nervous, if not actively hostile to the government's approach. Moreover, the suspicion, highlighted by members of the opposition parties, that the security reforms are a back-door form of *de facto* revision of the US–Japan Mutual Security Treaty and also the thin end of the wedge in terms of a more deliberate effort at wide-ranging constitutional revision, encompassing a whole range of sensitive political as well as strategic issues, may expose the government to further public criticism and resistance.

### The future of the alliance

For the US, Japan's acceptance of the principle of collective self-defence and the strengthening of the alliance was supposed to be a positive and welcome development. Cumulatively, over time, Japan's constitutional limitations on the deployment of Japanese military forces have imposed significant strains on the alliance; Japan, unlike South Korea or Australia, could not be expected to provide full and uncompromising support. Such an unbalanced alliance has risked generating a backlash in the US – if not among the general public, then at least within Congress. As Japan discovered to its cost during the first Gulf war in 1990, the perception that it might be unwilling to provide full support to an internationally sanctioned security initiative has sometimes exposed the country to sharp criticism for doing too little too late or for being a fair-weather alliance partner.

Furthermore, the new defence laws went hand in hand with the so-called pivot to Asia, or the rebalancing strategy of the United States. This strategy identifies China as a potential threat in the region, but the degree to which Washington, despite the rhetoric, is willing to commit itself in terms of military capabilities remains unclear. This is especially the case since instability in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as deteriorating relations with Russia in the wake of the Ukraine crisis,

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<sup>17</sup> 'Asahi poll: support for Abe cabinet drops to 37%; 57% oppose security bills', *Asahi Shimbun*, 20 July 2015, [https://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind\\_news/politics/AJ201507200028](https://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201507200028).

have raised questions about Washington's ability to mobilize sufficient resources in the event of an East Asian conflict. The solution to this potential crisis has been to request further cooperation from US allies, which will strengthen deterrence capabilities without imposing new strains on US forces. No wonder the Pentagon has greeted Japan's initiative as a long overdue enhanced commitment to the alliance and correction of an anomalous situation.

In contrast to the Pentagon, the US State Department has been more muted in its response to Japan's new defence proactivism.<sup>18</sup> This is curious given that an enhanced Japanese military role has been a US objective since the early 1950s. The explanation lies in the risk aversion of some planners in Washington and the potential for instability and military escalation in East Asia. They fear that the US may become reluctantly entangled in a regional conflict by chance rather than design. Consider a situation where Chinese and Japanese forces exchange fire over the control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands – not an implausible scenario given the recent marked increase in maritime and air incursions by Chinese forces into Japan's territorial waters surrounding the islands. President Barack Obama has made clear that the US stands by its Article V commitments in the US–Japan Security Treaty to defend Japan's administrative rights over the islands, even though it does not take a view on legal arguments underpinning the competing sovereignty claims associated with the territory. If Washington were not to send forces in support of Japan in the event of a conflict over the islands, the credibility of its alliance relations would be endangered not only in Japan but on a global scale. If, on the other hand, the US chooses to engage, then it risks being sucked into a possible full-blown conflict with China. The irony here is that it is now the US, and not Japan, that is afraid of entanglement – a stark reversal of the pattern of the past. Washington remains committed to deterring China (judging from its continuing resolve to station troops in Asia and the public statements of senior US military officials), but it appears to have a declining appetite for conflict. As a consequence, the credibility of its security posture may be at risk.

An additional factor that may be dimming Washington's enthusiasm for the partnership is the recent increase in tension between South Korea and Japan. Bilateral ties between Seoul and Tokyo were already bad in the days of President Lee Myung-bak and Prime Minister Noda, when talks over the controversial issue of comfort women broke down, prompting Lee to make the first visit by a serving South Korean president to the Takeshima/Dokdo islands, which are under Korean control but claimed by Japan. Lee's successor, President Park Geun-hye, has adopted an even tougher line, refusing to agree to a formal bilateral summit with Abe if Japan fails to take action on the comfort women question. For Park, the core issue appears to be one of trust, or rather the lack of it. The impression is that the South Korean president has lost faith in the ability of the Japanese political establishment, or at least key members of the Abe government, to make a genuine commitment to address contentious historical issues. It is not enough, according to the Korean side, for Abe simply to express his support for the Kono statement; Japan needs to do more to demonstrate its sincere and official commitment to compensate the few surviving Korean comfort women for past human rights abuses. Abe also needs to be scrupulous in avoiding any impression, however small, that he may tacitly or indirectly be sympathetic to those conservative voices at home that contest the value or legitimacy of the Kono statement. Deteriorating relations between Washington's two key regional allies, South Korea and Japan, have considerably weakened its strategic position in East Asia and are a source of intense frustration to US diplomats, who have become increasingly vocal in arguing that these contentious historical issues need to be resolved. Against this background, there are limits

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<sup>18</sup> Ascertained through interviews in New York in May 2015.

to the lengths to which the US will go in offering carte blanche support to the Abe government. There is no doubt that in Washington, Abe is seen as a more attractive and effective leader than his predecessor Hatoyama, but this does not mean that Japan's relations with the United States are stable or immune to disruption and uncertainty.

## History, war memories and the Abe administration

Despite its international prominence, the controversy over history has less traction domestically in Japan. Although Japanese progressive critics have accused Abe of being a revisionist, they have concentrated more on his security reforms and his preference for constitutional amendment. By contrast, the image of Abe as a historical revisionist who wishes to turn the clock back to the 1930s and who has not accepted Japan's responsibilities for the excesses of the colonial period and the Pacific war is popular not only in South Korea and China but also in certain quarters in the US and Europe. When Abe took office in 2012, the international press underlined its concern that a revisionist had assumed power in Japan;<sup>19</sup> Abe's visit to Yasukuni in 2013 was another occasion to revive that concern.

A close reading of Abe's public statements reveals a more nuanced picture. He has, in fact, been extremely careful to avoid making references to Japan's role in the Second World War or its colonial rule in the Korean peninsula and Taiwan. In his public statements abroad, he has consistently referred to modern Japan as a peace-loving nation that has learned the lessons from and atoned for its past mistakes:

Now, ladies and gentlemen, when we Japanese started out again after the Second World War, we thought long and hard over what had happened in the past, and came to make a vow for peace with their [sic] whole hearts. We Japanese have followed that path until the present day. We will never let the horrors of the past century's history repeat themselves. This vow that Japan made after the war is still fully alive today. It will never change going forward. There is no question at all about this point.

Yes, our countries both love peace. We value freedom and democracy. And we hold human rights and the rule of law dear.<sup>20</sup>

At home, Abe has repeatedly stressed that he endorses and adheres to both the Kono and Murayama statements, and echoed this once again in his official statement in August 2015 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of the Pacific war. However, in the run-up to the issue of the statement, there had been speculation that it might involve some modification of the original language from 1995. Speculation such as this, that once solid declarations may be open to reinterpretation, has provided ammunition for critics who want to accuse the government of harbouring revisionist sentiments. Such claims are given added weight by the inclusion in the current cabinet of members or former members of Nippon Kaigi, a conservative lobbying group that has been at the forefront of claims that Japanese history textbooks have embraced an overly apologetic, masochistic view of the past and are too dominated by progressive opinion.

Unpacking Abe's personal views on the history question is a difficult and inconclusive process. Judged purely in terms of his public statements, there is no conclusive evidence that he is a historical

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, 'Shinzo Abe must resist dangerous distractions', *Financial Times*, 28 April 2013, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/cc6d09a4-ae76-11e2-bdfd-00144feabdc0.html>; 'Another attempt to deny Japan's history', *New York Times*, 2 January 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/03/opinion/another-attempt-to-deny-japans-history.html>.

<sup>20</sup> 'Remarks by Prime Minister Abe to the Australian Parliament', 8 July 2014, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/statement/201407/0708article1.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201407/0708article1.html).

revisionist. Like any national leader who engages with sensitive historical issues, he needs to be assessed in the round, with appropriate consideration of his actual policies and his public statements – and, importantly, of what is omitted from as well as included in official publications. Similarly, gestures of reconciliation, whether directed at the world or the East Asian region, or at specific former adversaries, are an important barometer of sentiment, reflecting the views not just of the prime minister himself but also, very significantly, of the country he represents.

It is important, however, to distinguish between the spirit and the letter of the law when it comes to history. Unlike Koizumi, who maintained his distance from conservative movements, Abe has been indirectly associated with a variety of campaigns that are at the heart of Japan's increasingly fractious debate over identity politics. Whether over history textbooks, the status of the Japanese flag and national anthem, the legitimacy of the Tokyo Tribunal in adjudicating Japan's war crimes, or the role of public broadcasters such as NHK (the national television network) in reporting the past, Abe has been viewed, rightly or wrongly, as instinctively sympathetic to a conservative position. The danger is that he risks being pigeonholed as having a rigidly doctrinaire position that is tantamount to revisionism; alternatively, he risks being perceived as disingenuous and harbouring a private position that is much more hardline than his public statements. If the LDP wishes to avoid courting further controversy in a way that will undermine its authority and potentially jeopardize its ability to stay in power, Abe must refrain from any comments that could be interpreted as historical revisionism. Tone and nuance in this context are as important as the actual text of individual speeches, and he should be careful to avoid taking refuge in syntactical subterfuge or an excessively pedantic referencing of past statements as a way of demonstrating his non-revisionist bona fides.

If the Abe government wishes to stay in power, the only choice is to maintain its pragmatic foreign policy posture and avoid any statements that could potentially be interpreted as an endorsement of Japan's past wartime actions. This type of pragmatic approach was very much at the heart of the prime minister's first year in office, notwithstanding the controversy generated abroad by his Yasukuni visit.

Abe's position became even more entrenched in his second year. With a strong cabinet and economic recovery, the LDP won a landslide victory following a snap election in late 2014.<sup>21</sup> In the Diet, the LDP has a robust majority, and no opposition party is in a position to seriously challenge it in either the lower or the upper house. Within the LDP, moreover, there are no factions able to challenge the Seiwakai, and no major contenders for the office of the prime minister. Neither Nakasone nor Koizumi – two key examples of strong and effective prime ministerial leadership – enjoyed such a strong position in Japanese politics. In this regard, Abe is arguably uniquely placed to push forward with his more decisive foreign policy agenda.

Of course, it is often at the time of maximum strength that politicians need to guard against one of their most dangerous opponents – namely, hubris. In the absence of political challenges at home, Abe may overreach by pushing too far and too fast to promote his security agenda without carrying public opinion with him. The current dramatic explosion of popular demonstrations against the government's security legislation, and the opposition boycott of Diet proceedings in protest at the government's allegedly nonconsensual and 'undemocratic' forcing through of key legislation through committee, are distant echoes of the historical controversy that dominated Diet debates during the final years of the Kishi government in 1960. It would be a particularly ironic development if Abe,

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<sup>21</sup> Abe called the election to secure support for his economic reforms.

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who, by his own admission, deeply admired Kishi from a very young age, suffered the same political fate as his grandfather. Kishi, it should be remembered, successfully secured the passage of the revised US–Japan security treaty – a reform that was in essence a pragmatic early example of Japan's emerging foreign and security proactivism – only to find himself forced out of office, having lost the support of members of his own party and that of the general public. Politics is a fickle business, one that does not always reward brave and far-sighted leaders.

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This paper – the first of two on UK and Japanese foreign policy – forms part of the UK–Japan Global Seminar series, a five-year project (2013–17) to examine the ways in which these two countries, which share wide-ranging international interests and perspectives, are adapting to a changing world.

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